

Watsonville mayor in alleged bar brawl

mayor

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Investigation launched on allegations de la Paz harassed two women, struck one

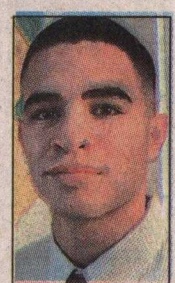
By **CATHY REDFERN** and **BRIAN SEALS**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITERS

WATSONVILLE — The Sheriff's Office launched an investigation Wednesday into allegations that Mayor Richard de la Paz Jr. struck a woman in an East Lake Avenue bar last week. Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina asked Sheriff Mark Tracy in a letter Tuesday to take over the investigation because it would be a conflict of interest for Watsonville police to investigate.

The dispute stems from the night of May 28, according to an e-mail sent to some council members by Chris Lauesen, one of the alleged victims. Lauesen said Wednesday that he wrote the e-mail because he thought the people of Watsonville "need to know what kind of mayor they have." Lauesen, 21, said an inebriated de la Paz harassed two women throughout the night at the Villager Bar and struck one of them when she refused his advances. De la Paz, 26, who also said he is a vic-

tim, declined to discuss details, citing the investigation, but denied striking the unidentified woman. "I didn't touch her," he said. De la Paz said he was at the bar with a cousin and a friend when a verbal confrontation ensued. He would not say what sparked the confrontation. He said he was assaulted by the woman and Lauesen. "I got punched," he said. He said he had not retained an attorney. Both men claim to have been jumped

by a group of men. De la Paz said the woman scratched him and that four to six men helped Lauesen jump him, according to a news report. Lauesen meanwhile says the mayor returned with two carloads of friends and jumped him, punching him several times. He said the mayor said, "Remember me, punk?" before attacking him. Lauesen said a police officer came to the bar and broke up the fight. The offi-



DE LA PAZ
Claims he is the victim.

See **MAYOR** on **PAGE A8**

Mayor: Council emphasizes allegations are just that; issue to be discussed Friday

Continued from Page A1

cer, who was not identified, filed no report and is now on vacation in San Diego. Clearly annoyed by visiting reporters Wednesday, a Villager bartender said, "the whole thing happened outside" and was blown out of proportion. "I don't even know who the mayor is," he said. Council members contacted by the Sentinel emphasized that the allegations are just that — allegations. But if proven true, they could prompt de la Paz's ouster as mayor. The council is scheduled to meet Friday at 6:30 p.m. to discuss the issue. "If the allegations are true, obviously we would have to take action," Councilman Ramon Gomez said. "We, as a City Council, don't condone that kind of behavior." Councilman Manuel Quintero Bersamin said more information is needed. "We on the council need to reserve judgment until the facts are in," Bersamin said. Vice Mayor Judy Doering-Nielsen said, "This is very embarrassing to the city." The City Council elects a mayor from its ranks and can remove the acting mayor. If that were done, Doering-Nielsen would ascend to the mayor post. The council does not have the power to oust fellow members from the board. Voters must recall a council member. Medina and Sheriff Tracy declined to reveal specifics of the night's events, saying the investigation was young and ongoing. Medina said Wednesday that de la Paz told him about an incident at the bar the day after it happened. However, Medina said he did

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COUNCILMAN RAMON GOMEZ

not realize until Monday that there was an allegation of criminal involvement. He said he could not discuss what de la Paz told him. The investigation was prompted by Lauesen's e-mail allegation, Medina said. He said the appearance of a conflict of interest arises in a number of ways. Of most concern, he said, is that officers are in contract negotiations with the city. "Plus the perception that no matter what we do, whether we exonerate or arrest the mayor, someone would think it was motivated by something other than the facts," Medina said. He said he would be privy to information the Sheriff's Office uncovers, but would not be in the decision-making loop. In the letter, Medina asked that the investigation be handled quickly because "it may be undertaken in a politically charged environment." De la Paz has been a rising star in area politics. After serving more than four years in the Navy, he returned to his hometown in 2000 and later that year ran for election to the city's 2nd District council seat, winning it at age 23. He won something of an upset victory against an opponent who was backed by five council members

and the Pajaro Valley Democratic party. During the campaign, he readily admitted he had been arrested at age 18 for petty theft. Last November, de la Paz' colleagues on the council chose him as mayor. Tracy said he has asked the head of the office's investigation bureau, Lt. Terry Parker, to head the inquiry into the allegations. Detectives began interviewing those involved Wednesday. Tracy refused to discuss a possible charge or estimate how long the investigation might take.

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